

Birnbaum joins community leaders at forum in Brooklyn

By Eddy Ball

NIEHS and National Toxicology Program Director Linda Birnbaum, Ph.D., spoke at the latest community forum May 21 in Brooklyn, New York. The forum series, which began in 1998, has featured directors of NIEHS at grassroots meetings in communities across the nation.

The evening forum and an afternoon bus and walking tour of Brooklyn's Sunset Park community (see [text box](#)) were hosted by UPROSE, Brooklyn's oldest community-based Latino organization dedicated to environmental justice. UPROSE Executive Director [Elizabeth Yeampierre, J.D.](#), is a former member of the NIEHS National Advisory Environmental Health Sciences Council.

The forum featured Birnbaum and community leaders in dialogue with members of the community, in what was billed as a post-Hurricane Sandy "Community Conversation on Toxic Risk, Climate Change, and Health."

"We look forward to continuing our support for environmental health and justice research, and working with community members, local officials, scientists, health care providers, and other partners here," Birnbaum said in her opening remarks.

Hearing from the community

Joining Birnbaum and people from Sunset Park were experts and community leaders, including Yeampierre; [Eddie Bautista](#), executive director of the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance; New York City Council member [Carlos Menchaca](#); and 12-term 7th Congressional District Representative [Nydia Velazquez](#) (D-NY).

In her remarks, Birnbaum proudly described the NIEHS commitment to environmental health research, which totaled \$25 million dollars in New York City for fiscal year 2014.

During that same period, the institute devoted \$62 million to climate-related exposures and conditions, which were underscored for New Yorkers by the massive flooding caused by Hurricane Sandy in 2012. In response to that disaster, UPROSE launched the Sunset Park Climate Justice and Community Resiliency Center, New York City's first grassroots-led, bottom-up, climate adaptation and community resiliency planning project.

"My institute spent more than \$265 million [in FY2014] studying toxic chemicals, toxic exposures, toxic substances, pesticide toxicity, and neurotoxicants," Birnbaum added. All of these are major concerns for the people of Sunset Park.

For the panelists, the forum was an opportunity to hear the public's environmental concerns and to share their own efforts to address those concerns. For the community, it was an opportunity to get the attention of people who could provide resources and shape policy.

Thanks to careful planning by Yeampierre and the UPROSE staff, the tour and forum were well-organized and engaging. As Melissa del Valle Ortiz, board president of the League of Women Voters of New York City, said, "We are lucky and blessed to have a community-based organization like UPROSE that knows what it takes to get things done."

(Eddy Ball is a contract writer with the NIEHS Office of Communications and Public Liaison.)



Yeampierre, left, joined Birnbaum and staffers from UPROSE and Brooklyn's Natural History Museum (NHM) to show off what the community gained from remediating a riverside brownfield — a waterfront park where people can relax with a view of the Manhattan skyline in the distance. (Photo courtesy of John Schelp)



One of the first stops on the tour was this older power plant, fueled by kerosene and gas. At the forum, residents said that particulate air pollution in parts of Sunset Park is severe enough to turn a white lawn chair black with soot by nightfall. (Photo courtesy of John Schelp)



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The "Welcome to Brooklyn" message was juxtaposed with the entrance to one of the city's busiest interstate highways, which crosses the length of Sunset Park. (Photo courtesy of John Schelp)



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Particulate matter from vehicle emissions contributes to pollution in Sunset Park. (Photo courtesy of John Schelp)



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Yeampierre described sources of pollution as the visitors rode past factories in a bus provided by NHM, which is known for bringing science to the community, including stuffed animals and skeletons. (Photo courtesy of John Schelp)



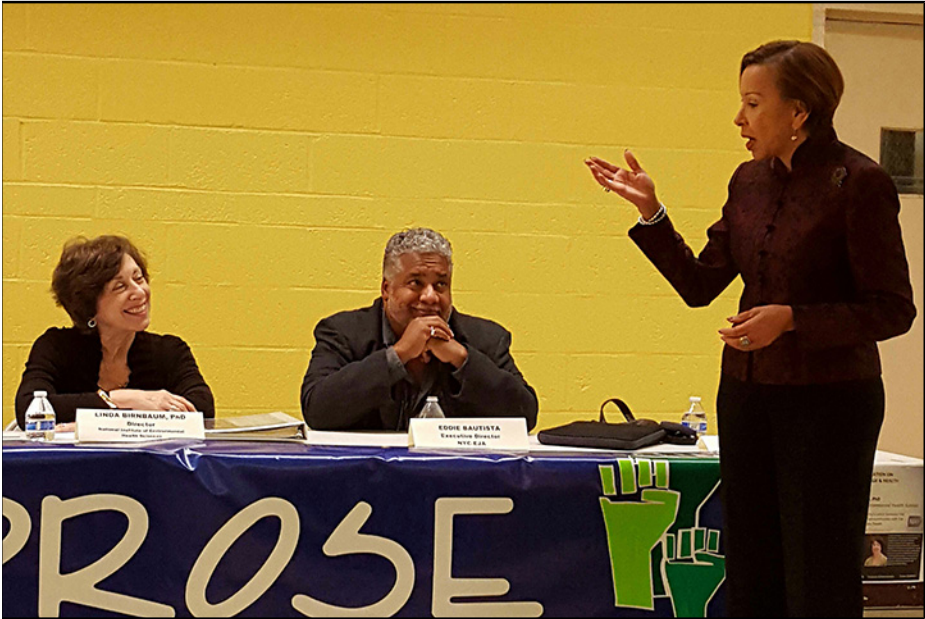
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Brownfields, such as this one framing a view of the new World Trade Center building across the Hudson River, are the result of generations of unregulated waste and hazardous chemical disposal. (Photo courtesy of John Schelp)



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At the evening forum, Birnbaum and Yeampierre heard from Menchaca, center, who represents a diverse district in New York, including a large Chinese and Latino immigrant population, the second largest public housing development in the city, and a waterfront community heavily affected by Hurricane Sandy. (Photo courtesy of John Schelp)



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Birnbaum and Bautista, center, reacted to comments from Velazquez. (Photo courtesy of John Schelp)



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Community members participated in the forum to hear and be heard by their representatives and advocates. (Photo courtesy of John Schelp)

The other side of Brooklyn

Although several neighborhoods in the borough of Brooklyn, such as Williamsburg, Greenpoint, and Bay Ridge, have gotten media attention for gentrification and trendy new bars and restaurants, Sunset Park is not one of them. In marked contrast to hipper parts of Brooklyn, Sunset Park, which is made up of predominantly working class families of Puerto Rican, Mexican, and Chinese descent, remains an industrial waterfront community.

Sunset Park faces environmental health challenges from its Jackie Gleason bus depot, heavy truck and automobile traffic on its three expressways, power plants, a sludge transfer facility, and dozens of brownfield sites, or sites with former industrial or commercial uses that are affected by environmental contamination.

Factories, piers, and brownfields, line the Hudson River shoreline, offering little access for people in the community. As Bautista noted during the forum, “One hundred years ago, this waterfront is where we put stuff we didn’t want to see — factories, dumps, and immigrants.”

Birnbaum’s tour also provided an opportunity to see new signs of revitalization, visit former brownfields that have been remediated and repurposed as riverside parks, and hear from people on the ground in Sunset Park.

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